



ALONE ON THE KEY*

by Carolyn Gilliam

It is sunset on Sand Key. The hot Florida sun is almost gone, and the winds rustling in off the Gulf are blustery and testy. Hardly anyone comes out to Sand Key on a weekday, and those who do usually leave once the heat of day is past. This is quite a contrast to the ultra-commercial Clearwater Beach a few miles away, with its black-topped parking lots, rows of nondescript motels, and brazenly bare girls with skin the color of peeled tomatoes. There is nothing on Sand Key except a few piers, a few bathers, and the greedy, shrieking gulls.

The moment of peace comes but once or twice a year. I must recognize that it is there and appreciate its presence, or it will pass me by. First, I forget that a few yards away my parents, grandparents, brother, and dog are getting ready to head back to town. Delicately, I pick my way out to the water; I watch carefully for pieces of driftwood and broken shells. As I reach the edge of the sea, a petite wavelet shyly creeps up to my feet, and the bits of sand and shell roll off, tickling me slightly. The next midget wave is braver. It laps up around my ankles and runs back out, taking some of the sand out from under my feet. To show how bold they are, the subsequent swells snatch more and more sand from me until there is virtually nothing left to stand on. I finally have to move over.

The wind also has to prove itself. It rustles and thrusts past me, letting me know that I am no obstacle to it. It picks up my hair, plays with it, then lets it whip around my neck and shoulders. My beach jacket flutters at its will, flopping and slapping my backside. It pushes me backwards a little; and, having exhibited its might, it moves on. I shiver imperceptibly.

I turn my attention to the diligent little sandpipers, methodically skittering up and down the beach hunting for something to eat. They usually do not come out until evening. Maybe that is because the overbearing sea gulls are blatantly begging and carousing during the day. They are decidedly arrogant birds. The sandpipers, though, are so timid, yet confident. I am big, and they do not know what I am, so they stay away. Still, in their quest for dinner, they are utterly

businesslike, trying to ignore me, always bustling about, devouring a morsel, bustling about, devouring another morsel, bustling about . . .

Once more, the wavelets have run away with the sand that was under my feet. In deference, I move over again. Now I look out to the horizon. I have saved the best for last; the sun is about to drop off into the sea. In a last effort to remind the world that it is still the boss, it has painted the sky with its own extravagantly peculiar colors. There are streaks of yellow, orange, electric pink, and other innumerable, indescribable hues. The sun itself is sitting out on the water, staring at me with its pinkish-orangish-reddish eye. As I watch, it winks out under the surface, leaving the brilliant explosion of color as testimony that it will return. The gleaming blue-black of night descends, crushing the sun's artwork into the water. Daddy, or someone, has sneaked up to get a snapshot of this. My mood is broken, and I turn away.

